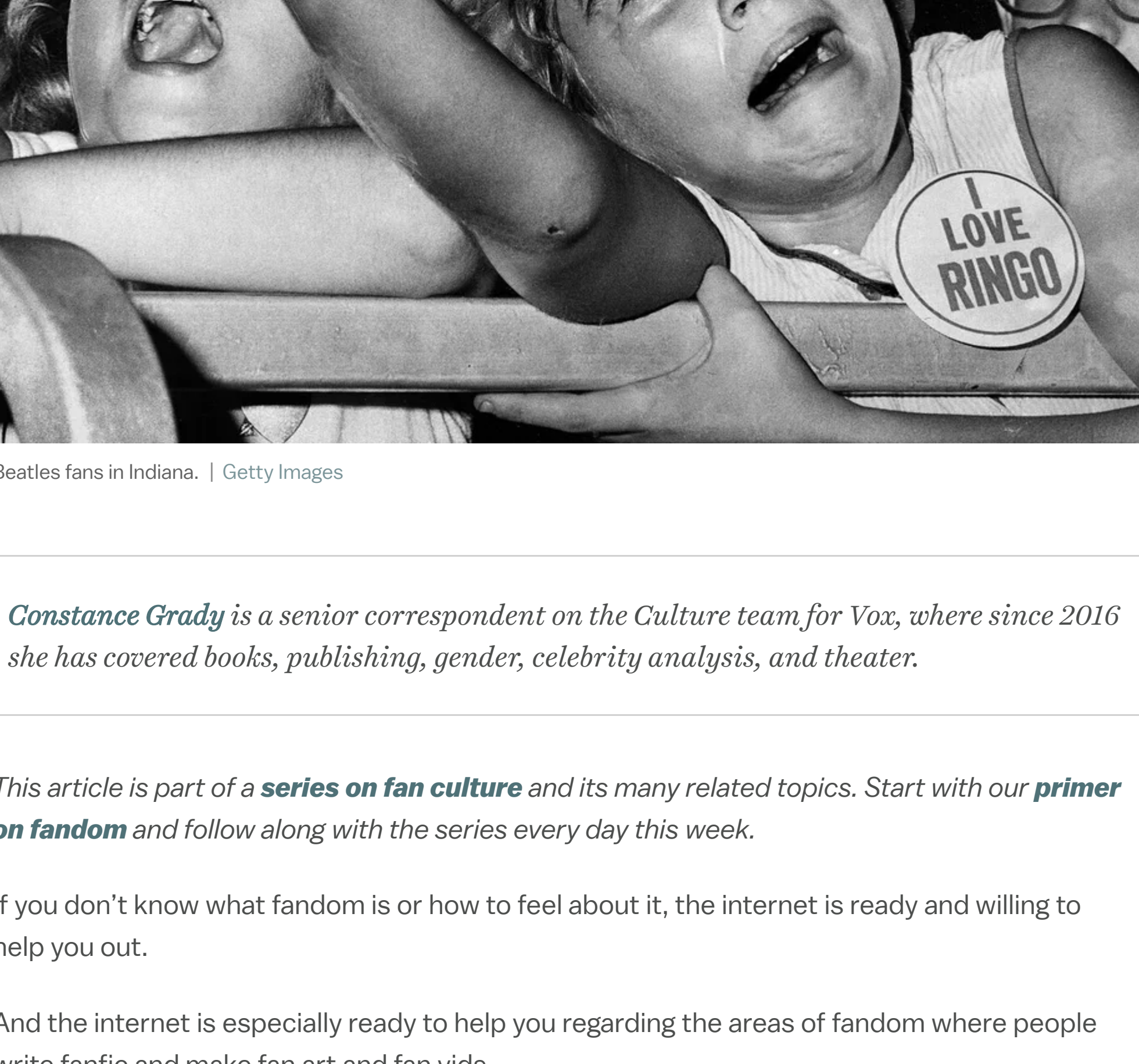


CULTURE

Why we're terrified of fanfiction

By Constance Grady | @constancegrady | Jun 2, 2016, 2:00pm EDT

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Beatles fans in Indiana. | Getty Images

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This article is part of a **series on fan culture** and its many related topics. Start with our **primer on fandom** and follow along with the series every day this week.

If you don't know what fandom is or how to feel about it, the internet is ready and willing to help you out.

And the internet is especially ready to help you regarding the areas of fandom where people write fanfic and make fan art and fan vids.

There's a special ire reserved for the particular corner of the web where people make transformative works about the media they love — and given that this corner is primarily composed of young women, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this ire is gendered.

A new "fandom is broken" article and the ensuing avalanche of responses is only the latest iteration of a familiar cycle

Most recently, Birth Movies Death editor Devin Faraci declared that **"fandom is broken."** He argued that modern fandom exists in a consumerist culture of entitlement, citing primarily the backlash to the **all-female *Ghostbusters* reboot**, the backlash to making **Captain America a member of Hydra**, and the **#GiveElsaAGirlfriend campaign** as evidence that fans feel that the artists they support owe it to them to kowtow to their whims.

And young fans, he noted disapprovingly, seem to be "uninterested in conflict or personal difficulty in their narratives (look at the popularity of fan fics set in coffee shops or bakeries, which posit the characters of a comic or TV show or movie they love as co-workers having sub-sitcom level interactions.)."

Fandom, of course, responded.

Harassment is a problem all over the internet, it's not specific to fandom, and why is a taste for a harmless coffee shop AU fanfic tantamount to abandoning difficult stories? fan journalists wrote. **Conflating campaigns against inclusion with campaigns for inclusion** is a weird move, some pointed out. Fandom **isn't so much entitled as it is increasingly critical** of the art it interacts with, others insisted.

All of these arguments are very familiar.

To wit:

- Fandom is a mass of lightsaber-clutching nerds camping out all night on the sidewalk to buy movie tickets, and fundamentally either **sophomoric** or **solipsistic**.
- All fanfiction is slash**, and all slash is pornographic. **All slash is by straight teenage girls**. No, **all slash** is by middle-aged gay men.
- Or, worst of all, **fandom is a group of oversexed teenaged girls** writing porny and borderline illiterate fanfiction, **which is wrong for moral**, aesthetic, and legal reasons.
- Plus, **why would you write about someone else's characters** when you could be making up your own?

And the fan counterpoints:

- Some fans are curative**, which means they're into knowing all the trivia about a given piece of media or canon and discussing it in minute detail. Some are **transformative**, which means they're into writing fanfiction or drawing fan art and making fan vids. Some are into both! Fandom is not a monolith.
- Fanfiction writers are mostly women**. Writers for the fanfiction site **Archive of Our Own** are mostly but not overwhelmingly **just out of college**; other sites, like Wattpad, skew younger.
- There has been **lots of respected literary fanfiction**. **Shipping** "is as straightforward as rooting for Ross and Rachel to get together; it's as complex as reading between the lines in Victorian literature, searching for the queer subtext and desire coded in that language." **Slash is popular** but not the only game in town, and not all slash is pornographic.
- Fic writers are not wasting time that could be spent developing original work; **they're enjoying a hobby**.

This conversation has been happening for a very, very long time. Someone will write about how fandom in general and fanfiction in particular is weird and probably morally wrong, and someone else will write a response defending fandom, and then the whole thing will repeat itself again in a few months or days or hours.

So why does the cycle keep repeating itself? What is it about fan culture in general, and fanfiction in particular, that is so threatening that people keep feeling the need to write moralizing think pieces on it, and that the deluge of responding think pieces has little to no effect?

There's a sharp gender divide within fandom communities

Both the attacks and the defenses of fandom have been more or less the same for decades. In 1986, women were writing articles defending fandom in the **New York Times**.

More specifically, one woman defended woman-centric fandom. Her name is **Camille Bacon-Smith** (she is now, delightfully, the author of several series of paranormal romances), and back then she was a *Star Trek* fan. Bacon-Smith was into transformative *Star Trek* fandom: zines, fan art, fanfic. That fandom mostly comprised women, she wrote:

Male fans of the show generally balk at the restriction and prefer to engage in activities such as costuming or crafts, for which payment is not a traditional reward. Women, who traditionally spend large portions of their lives working in relative isolation for little or no pay, bring a different set of motivations to their writing and art. They want to talk to other women, to express themselves in the science fiction form that until recently has all but excluded them. The writers cannot sell their work, but they don't have to meet commercial criteria for success either: they must please only the predominantly female *Star Trek* fan community.

Transformative fandom is still overwhelmingly dominated by women; Archive of Our Own **found** that more of its users identified as genderqueer (6 percent) than as male (4 percent). Men who are involved in fandom are more likely to participate in curative fandom. They end up on Reddit, ranking every Doctor on *Doctor Who*. Women who are involved in fandom are more likely to end up on Tumblr, dream-casting a **racebent version of Doctor Who**.

Since the '90s, the popular explanation for the gender split has shifted. Bacon-Smith theorized that men aren't into transformative fandom because they don't like writing for free, leaving that endeavor for the women. But Reddit user **LordByronic**, who coined the transformative/curative terms I've been using, argues that women, the queer community, and people of color tend to be drawn to transformative fandom for other reasons:

Because the majority of professionally-made media is catered towards a straight white male demographic, leaving little room for 'outsiders.' Outsiders who, if they want to see themselves in media, have to attack it and change it — hence slash fic, hence long essays claiming that Hermione Granger is black, hence [headcanons] about trans characters or genderqueer characters.

The argument has picked up steam. Elizabeth Minkel, for instance, expanded it for the **New Statesman**:

My preferred explanation is the idea that the vast majority of what we watch is from the male perspective — authored, directed, and filmed by men, and mostly straight white men at that. Fan fiction gives women and other marginalised groups the chance to subvert that perspective, to fracture a story and recast it in her own way. ... It often feels as if there isn't much space for difference in the dominant cultural narratives; in fandom, by design, there's space for all.

What's inarguable is that curative fandom tends to treat transformative fandom with a kind of bafflement verging on downright hostility — the same reaction, more or less, that most non-fandom groups have toward fandom in general. The hosts of *Gilmore Guys*, the fan-run podcast that does three-hour analyses of every episode of *Gilmore Girls*, have said on their show that fanfiction "goes too far." People who make their living writing about television and comics say they **"don't get shipping"** (not my italics) or that shipping is **"gross and dumb."**

There's a kind of hierarchy at work here: Fandom in general is weird and confusing — and potentially immoral and maybe dangerous. Transformative fandom in particular — the kind of fandom filled mostly with women — is weirder and more confusing, almost definitely immoral, also gross, and maybe dangerous.

Why are we so afraid of fandoms?

So what's so dangerous about fandom? Because it is considered dangerous. It's considered so dangerous, in fact, that in the '90s, Scotland Yard developed a secret file on fans of shows like *The X-Files* and *Star Trek* to make sure they weren't planning on pulling a **Heaven's Gate**. Scotland Yard took the threat seriously: "What is of concern," **they wrote**, "is the devotion certain groups and individuals ascribe to the contents of these programmes. ... The problem is that growing numbers are not treating this as entertainment, and finding it impossible to divorce fantasy from reality."

The fear isn't completely baseless — fandom is not a cult, but **cults have come out of fandoms**, and the members of Heaven's Gate were fans of a lot of different sci-fi. But surely fewer sci-fi fandoms have begat dangerous cults than, say, sports games have led to dangerous riots? Yet if any police force has a stash of secret files on sports fans, they're keeping it a very closely guarded secret. No one is writing tittering, vaguely disgusted anthropological examinations of sports fandom.

There's something specific about *media* fandom, and to devoting large amounts of emotional energy to media in particular, that is particularly threatening. Adult men crying and engaging in acts of physical violence over sports is expected; people crying over a TV show is weird; women writing stories where Kirk and Spock are more than just friends is not only weird but disgusting and dangerous too.

Of course, sports fandom is masculine. It's overwhelmingly male-dominated, it's macho, it's something we as a culture have decided is "manly." (This designation erases the many very real women who are into sports, but it remains our cultural image of sports fandom.) Media fandom's image is, if not feminine, at the very least a hell of a lot less masculine than sports fandom — and that makes it weird. And fanfiction is not only "unmasculine" but actively feminine, designed for women rather than men — and that makes it gross and dangerous.

Media for young women has long been considered a threat

To some, feminine media has *always* been considered gross and dangerous, going back as far as the novel. In 1864, **an anonymous pastor** pronounced it the greatest threat in the world to young women:

I have seen a young lady with her table loaded with volumes loaded of fictitious trash, poring day after day and night after night over highly wrought scenes and skillfully portrayed pictures of romance, until her cheeks grew pale, her eyes became wild and reckless, and her mind wandered and was lost — the light of intelligence passed behind a cloud, and her soul was forever benighted. She was insane, incurably insane from reading novels.

The pastor's moralizing disgust for novel readers is identical to the disgust we see directed today at young women who read and write fanfiction. "This isn't healthy for anyone," writes fantasy author **Robin Hobb** of fanfiction. When crying over slash fic, **Dan Bergstein writes**, you can do only five things:

- One: Giggles.
- Two: Gently whisper "No" to an empty room.
- Three: Solemnly shake your head at humanity.
- Four: Stare out the window as you try to make sense of it all.
- Five: Send links to all of your friends.

Historically, whenever young women are interested in a form of media, we like to tell them it is bad for them and that they are bad for liking it — unless the media goes mainstream, in which case it becomes no longer feminine and hence okay. Novels are dangerous and cause insanity, until they become the focus of being studied in college. **Beatlemania** is the province of "the dull, the idle, the failures," until the Beatles become a band that everyone loves.

Young women are so attacked for loving the media they love that it is a radical act for a young woman to love something unashamedly. And transformative fandom is the most radical act of all, because it reverses that "lady thing to respectable thing" process. It takes a piece of media that may not have been designed for young women and makes it for young women.

The all-male creative team of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* may not have intended for the movie to be read as a homoerotic love story, but young women are willing and able to make it one, writing fanfiction and drawing fan art about Steve and Bucky in love. Fans are well aware that Disney has no plans to put that story onscreen, **writes Charlotte Geater**. They make their fan works anyway:

We don't wrestle with feelings and we can recognise them in stories when we see them. We don't need for them to be sanctioned. It doesn't matter what the writer intended, or what the artists intended. More importantly, it doesn't matter how Disney wants me to interact with the stories that they bankroll. ... One of the most radical things I tell myself about the media I consume is: fuck canon.

What is scary about transformative fandom is that it's a place where young women love their media without reservation, and where they can make stories for themselves. That's why as a culture we've decided that transformative fandom is weird and gross and morally wrong, and that's why all the articles in the world explaining that transformative fandom is a totally legitimate way to interact with a text aren't really making a dent in the never-ending stream of repulsed investigations of fandom. Because fandom is the province of young women and, culturally, we find young women terrifying.

Previous entry: Canon, fanon, shipping and more: a glossary of the tricky terminology that makes up fan culture

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